

Officials weigh value of studies

Review sought on water health risks

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State health officials are reconsidering plans not to conduct health studies of Valley residents to determine if they have suffered from drinking water tainted with a rocket fuel additive.

Department of Health Service officials said they were requested by state Sen. Hilda Solis, D-La Puente, to reexamine their position against carrying out epidemiological studies on the effects of the chemical perchlorate.

"We have queried our epidemiological people about this and they certainly have an interest, but we need to sit down and talk again," said David Spath, chief of the Department of Health Service's Division of Drinking Water and Environmental Management.

"They have raised questions about what would have to be looked at for studies to bear fruit and the availability of data."

A chlorine derivative added to rocket fuel, munitions and fireworks, the chemical was found in June at concentrations above state health standards in wells in the Baldwin Park area operated by four water districts.

The wells have since been shut down, or the water is being blended with other sources to reduce concentrations to levels considered safe.

At large doses, perchlorate

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WATER Solis demands agency take action

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inhibits the absorption of iodine by the thyroid, and can cause enlargement of the thyroid gland, sluggishness and even depression. Its effects at lower levels, especially on pregnant women and infants, are unknown, while at even higher levels it may be toxic.

Health officials have said determining whether residents were affected by the chemical could be very difficult, since its known side effects occur at doses of roughly 49,000 parts per billion and apparently only as long as it is ingested.

Valley wells have so far been found to have contain perchlorate at levels easily below 200 parts per billion. The affected water districts are La Puente Valley County, San Gabriel Valley County and Valley County, as well as Suburban Water Systems.

Nevertheless, in letters sent July 27 to the health department and the Los Angeles Regional Water Quality Control Board, Solis demanded the state health agency take action and conduct the studies.

"It is critical that the Department of Health Services conducts studies in order to assess any health effects to residents, especially children. We can not afford to wait until we find more contamination," the letters state.

Solis was vacationing and could not be reached for com-

ment. Her spokesman, Jose Moreno, said he was heartened state health officials were reconsidering their prior stance against the studies.

"I am optimistic in their response in that they are at least being open minded in considering it and not saying 'No,'" said Moreno. "It's a starting point, and we can move forward from there. If there is something wrong, let's get the information out."

Spath said that while the department is reconsidering its position, it is far from making a decision. That would likely wait until results are in from animal studies commissioned by the U.S. Air Force.

"Right now know we know of one effect and that is on the thyroid function, and that is at larger concentrations. Does it have the same effect at levels in the 20 to 30 to 40 parts per billion range? It's probably fairly remote," he said.

"Then the question becomes what subtle effects would you see at those levels," Spath said. "From what I gather there just is not a great deal of information out there about that yet. You are shooting for a needle in a haystack, and not even a needle when you don't know what you are looking for."

The animal studies commissioned by the Air Force, the largest consumer of rockets nationwide, are intended to answer those questions, but the results are not expected for perhaps up to a year.

State health officials decided to conduct the water tests this spring after perchlorate was found leaching into drinking water supplies in eastern Sacramento County near an Aerojet plant that manufac-

Perchlorate: The Valley's latest threat to drinking water



Sources: State Department of Health Services; local water officials

Tests conducted by the state Department of Health Services over the last two months have found perchlorate at levels above state standards in wells south of Azusa. The chemical is used as an oxidizer in rocket fuel, munitions and fireworks, some of which has been used or manufactured in the Valley. Officials are unsure how long perchlorate has been in the ground water.

Perchlorate slows the thyroid gland's absorption of iodine and its production of thyroxine, which regulates growth and metabolism. It has been used as a medical treatment for hyperactive thyroids, and cause sluggishness and depression in others. At extremely high levels it may be toxic. Its effect at lower levels on pregnant women and infants remains unclear.

Water experts have not as yet developed a good way to extract the chemical from water, as they have with industrial solvents that are responsible for much of the Valley's underground water pollution.

Wells found contaminated by perchlorate

1. La Puente Valley County District: All three of its wells are now shut. Levels up to 55-159 parts per billion.
2. San Gabriel Valley County Water District: One well shut. Up to 72 parts per billion.
3. Valley County Water District well, leased to Suburban Water Systems: Well still in use, water blended to safe levels. Up to 40 parts per billion.
4. Valley County Water District: Test well operated by San Gabriel Basin Water Quality Authority, not in regular use. Levels up to 61 parts per billion.

Staff graphic by MANUEL AMAYA

tures rocket engines.

Aerojet has a second facility in Azusa that it has operated for decades, but the company denies it is responsible for the perchlorate contamination, saying it has not manufactured rocket engines locally since the early 1960s.

The contamination so far has been discovered in the same area where carcinogenic

industrial solvents, the Valley's other major pollutant, was discovered in 1979.

Plans to clean up the solvents are being delayed while the federal EPA and more than a dozen companies believed responsible for the contamination search for a method that also would clean up the perchlorates.